

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,  
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,  
on the Occasion of the Parish Annual Meeting (12 November 2006)

## **Sailing the Course**

This is my seventh Annual Meeting report to you as your Rector, and I want to make my report by beginning with a very personal story. It is a story about a conversation I had with my son, Noah, when he was visiting us this past August. His visit was special because he had just returned from his stint, volunteering himself to the Bishop of El Salvador; and he was wrestling with whether to return. We sat in our backyard porch, talking about these important things. As we spoke, my heart filled to overflowing, as I cherished this latest version of our father-son relationship. Yet, I virtually lost my breath over the realization that we were also talking man to man. With my own eyes, I could see in new and stunning ways how my son -- my only son -- had continuously blossomed into beautiful, reliable, honorable manhood.

As we talked – or more truthfully, as I listened, Noah poured out his agony over what to do. He had lost fifteen pounds on a body that was always athletically lean. He was still fighting some troubling tropical intestinal distress, which I as his father anxiously assumed would be fatal. He rapidly ran through the litany of things he had done to start a literacy program, to gain the people's trust, to represent the Bishop, and to live day-to-day in such a remote place that the Anglican Salvadorians did not want to go there. Objective about my son (and my daughters) as I always am, I had told him how heroic he had been, how proud of him I was. And then he said it.

Noah looked at me with a pained-yet-wistful face and asked: "But Dad, what difference does it all make?"

My heart stopped for a moment, I am quite sure, because in that question I both saw myself and heard my own voice. And yet, my son needed an answer, one I knew I did not have. But a moment of grace overshadowed me, and I found myself saying this to Noah – and to myself.

Our lives are like boats. We must chart a course and stay as steady as possible on that course. This takes our very best efforts, especially since there are many obstacles that make this sailing challenging. But it is up to each of us to steer the course and to make headway toward our destination. The hard part, the frustrating part is that we tend to measure our lives in terms of making headway. While making progress is important, it seems to me that the real impact of our lives is a function of the wake we create. And the thing about the wake is that because we are trying to keep our eyes on the horizon, marking our way with the compass, we mostly don't see the wake our headway produces. We are largely

unaware of what the wake does because it is mostly behind us and because it laps on a shore we have long since passed by.

As I say, for me this conversation was a moment of grace. I believe those words are fundamentally true both for people and for institutions like St. Martin's. For Christian people and Christian institutions, Christ is the goal and Christ is the course to follow. And the point of this journey, this voyage is -- as the writer to the Hebrews expresses it at the close of this morning's epistle: Christ came to deal with those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Heb. 9:28) Or in the image of my story, Christ came to welcome ashore those who faithfully sail to him.

In 2004, for the first time in our half-century of life and ministry, the people of St. Martin's consciously and publicly charted a course toward Christ. That moment will undoubtedly (and appropriately) pass into the fog of this community's history, but God knows -- you know, I know -- that this defining process gifted this parish ship with a reliable rudder, by which we committed ourselves to sail a measurable course for Christ. That rudder comes in the form of a clear and workable purpose statement: "that St. Martin's purpose is to equip Christ's disciples: To Love; To Grow; To Serve." And from this prayerful sense of purpose, we have named five priority ministries as the hallmarks of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, Columbia, South Carolina.

You have in your hands now a copy of this rudder and the five "compass points" by which we find our way ahead. *I call every member of St. Martin's to celebration and thanksgiving for the fact that we have moved to our maturity through these precious instruments.* By them and with them, we have refused the temptation to get by as an anonymous, generic group and opted, instead, for definition as responsible, reliable partners of Christ in this world.

Generations to come will bless our forgotten names for such a gift, as they continue the legacy of mature, disciplined, joyful Christian life and ministry. This generation of parishioners -- you and me -- should be proud of the clear direction of our course and the wake we have offered for God's sovereign use.

So, let me guide you to the chart by which we sail and call your attention to some of the wake that together we are making.

**WORSHIP:** The first priority of St. Martin's is "to be a church where prayer and worship are the foundations of all that we do."

Liturgy is my first love, when it comes to participating in the life of faith; and I am so very grateful that this community has a deep feel for what worship is truly about. Worship is, first and foremost, about God and what life with God is like. We quite literally "do this" so that in the trials and distractions of our lives we may not forget God nor forget what life with God sounds like, looks like, smells like, tastes like, feels like. Truly, all the rest is detail.

God first – because there is good news to recall, good news to ingest, good news to hear and proclaim, good news that responds to the haunting question: “What difference does it make?”

I fervently believe that you will have to go a long way to find more faithful, more dynamic, more powerful, more reliable worship than what is found at St. Martin’s. And this is all done in the spirit of thanksgiving to God in Christ. St. Martin’s is faithful to the Prayer Book tradition, knowing with increasing clarity that the liturgy is, in fact, scripture and tradition in action. St. Martin’s knows that worship is about the drama of our redemption, in which every one of us plays a starring player.

I am unspeakably grateful to have the privilege of being the rector of a parish where the unchangeable truths of God’s love and life in Christ are expressed so steadily and yet with such appropriate creativity. Worship is alive here. Where else do the people allow us to reach out toward God, not only with the traditional Prayer Book praise but also with a Jazz Mass, a Celtic Mass, a Caribbean Mass, a Bluegrass Mass? Where else will your soul be fed by such a comprehensive offering of music excellence, where you can hear the congregation sing an 18<sup>th</sup> century chestnut of a hymn, followed by the Gregorian chanting of a psalm, concluded with a gospel anthem or a 20<sup>th</sup> century composition? And all of it done seamlessly, as if God held the needle and thread.

Where else are committed strides made to live the spirituality of the Book of Common Prayer so that real spiritual muscle is developed in the rhythms of the Daily Offices and Holy Communion? Where else are laity so visibly confident about taking their positions of leadership in the liturgy and in helping to shape the reality of our prayer – that we hold all this not only on our lips but in our lives?

*I call the membership of this parish to celebration and thanksgiving for treasuring and fostering the gift of transforming worship.* And in order to take the next step on our voyage toward Christ, there is one thing this community needs to do with respect to its worship priority. It is this: be present -- at least weekly -- to keep the prayers together.

On any given Sunday, 75% of our membership is not in church. This statistic is only 4% better than the national average, which indicates that of the 79% of Americans who identify themselves as Christian, only 21 % worship on Sunday. In order for us to take the next step in our mature faithfulness and growth, I am asking you to make this commitment to “show up.” I am also asking you, who are among the 25% who are present, to re-invite those members who have drifted away from us and become lapsed members. Moreover, I am asking you to invite those who are skeptical of us and share with them your respectful joy in our spiritual and liturgical life.

The second priority of our parish course is **MEMBERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**. Membership Development pertains to the challenge Christ, himself, gives to his flock to go and make disciples of all the nations. This is the Great Commission, to share with those we meet the integrity and joy of belonging to Christ Jesus. We have expressed this priority as excelling “at welcoming, inviting, and connecting people in the life of the Gospel in this parish.”

One of my delights as Rector of St. Martin’s is to be out and about in the community and have someone come up to me and thank me for something that St. Martin’s has done. This past week I had two such experiences. One was two Saturdays ago in Lowe’s. I was doing some carpentry at home and in need of a few things, when a stranger walked by me in the parking lot and said: “That was a great Confirmation service last Sunday! Thank you!” The other occurred later in the week. I was in the gym, toweling off from my shower(!), when another stranger said the same thing.

We, at St. Martin’s, have been given a great deal, which means we have a great deal to share. Yet, of all the priorities set before us, “Membership Development” is the most ticklish for us. We like to think of ourselves as welcoming, but we all know that we can do better. We like to think of ourselves as inviting, but we all know that we can do better. We like to think of ourselves as connecting people to the things of God for which we, ourselves, hunger; but we know that we can do better.

Last September 10<sup>th</sup>, we celebrated our fifth annual Jazz Mass, and as usual, it was splendid. And one of the reasons that it was so wonderful was that you invited people to come. You welcomed them with your shepherding assurance, and you connected them with your confidence and enthusiasm for what would occur in church.

That Sunday, we had 319 people in the congregation at the 10:30 Jazz Mass, and nearly half of those were our guests. And it felt good! It felt good to have a full house. It felt good to see those faces. It felt good to hear their voices. It felt good to share our home, our holy home. It felt good, and you did it.

*I call every member of St. Martin’s to celebration and thanksgiving for the gift of hospitality and our willingness to share the abundance of our life in community. And in order to take the next step on our course to Christ, I need 12 people with passion for hospitality: to help us be more assertive in welcoming newcomers and to help us be more conscious of being invitational to the stranger..*

I need 12 people to form the core of an infectious attitude of preaching the gospel, not from the pulpit but from welcoming care and connecting presence. Let’s pump our Membership Development priority up in the coming year! Who are the 12? I want to know.

**CHRISTIAN FORMATION** is our third parish priority, and suddenly this year something is brewing in our midst in this field. We have a dedicated cadre of faculty. The Sunday School is humming, especially with the newly added class for two-year olds. Sandy Morrison tells me that the teachers for that class definitely see a lot of energy, as they develop future Vestry leaders! Furman Buchanan has reconvened our Youth Ministry with skill and effectiveness and is steadily assisting adults to be responsible for sustaining this vitally significant ministry to our teens. And most wonderful of all is the fact that 40 adults meet every Thursday night, for a total of 20 meetings, for theological development and discussion under the aegis of our DOCC program (“Disciples of Christ in Community.”)

Added to these exciting events is the steady list of formation offerings. There are four different adult classes offered every Sunday morning. There are classes for our middle schoolers, junior highs, and senior highs. Bruce Carter and Jeannie Saylor mentored eight of our senior highs in preparation for Confirmation last month. Moreover, on Monday mornings a group of about a dozen people gather for Bible Study. The Tuesday Morning Prayer and Study Group has been meeting for over thirty years and now boasts 15-20 regulars each week. And beyond that formation gathering, this Tuesday Morning group continually provides leadership in sponsoring parish meals and get-togethers.

*So, once again I call the membership of St. Martin's to celebration and thanksgiving for the gift of being formed in the stature of Christ. And what we need to do next in order in our voyage is to grant ourselves the grace to develop a deep and abiding spirituality so that going to church is not just another thing to do. Rather, I sincerely hope that each of us will be swept up by an increasing sense of being in relationship to God in Christ.*

Christian formation is not just about the head; it is about awakening the heart with mature awareness and a deep passion for God. I want this for everyone who comes in contact with St. Martin's.

Our fourth priority is **PASTORAL CARE**. As the priority states, “St. Martin's vision is to be church that is a pastoral care center for members in times of crisis – both large and small.”

Pastoral Care is about making sure that our members are healthy and whole so that we are in a position to serve the world in Christ's Name. These two elements of care and service go together. For we cannot give away what we do not have.

As I have taught you regularly, “salvation” is not a pie-in-the-sky, church word, not by a long shot. No, “salvation” means “health” and “wholeness.” It is, in fact, the derivative, the consequences of being in Communion -- with God and with one another. And I can think of no better hallmark for a church than to be known as a place of such care, of such concrete “salvation.”

On page 855 of the Prayer Book, in the Catechism section, the question is raised: "Who are the ministers of the church?" The answer, in descending order of importance, is, "lay people, bishops, priests, and deacons." In a profoundly significant way, baptism is "ordination." It is ordination to the "priesthood of all believers." This is to say that offering pastoral care, maintaining the healthy connections between us and among us, must never be limited to the clergy. It can't be. Pastoral care is each member's responsibility, and St. Martin's has many pastoral care boats afloat, making headway, creating healing wake.

For instance, almost every Sunday morning, the congregation sends our Eucharistic Ministers to bring to the sick and shut in the Holy Mysteries of our Lord. Inevitably, these lay ministers develop small congregations of lonely and separated people, and through them St. Martin's ministers new life, new hope, and healing contact. Barbara Kelly organizes the Eucharistic Ministers, and I am thankful for their faithful hands and feet, which extend God's Communion to those in need. When it comes to maintaining the sacramental life and presence of Christ, St. Martin's delivers! Just call us, and we'll be there, if you cannot be.

Mary Clark helps me keep an eye on our elders. She has a small group of callers who simply stay in touch with our oldest members, whose age and circumstance keeps them from our direct contact. And I am so grateful for her leadership and the quiet, effective ministry her guild performs.

In terms of the clergy's pastoral care, let me state this as clearly as I can: I expect to be notified when there is any medical, emotional, or spiritual crisis or demanding situation. These situations have always been a priority for me and for my staff, but we cannot respond to what we do not know.

Our commitment to pastoral care is typified by our recent experience of the Healing Liturgy during our Sunday morning worship. I have written more extensively about this experience in the upcoming newsletter, but for now *I call St. Martin's to celebration and thanksgiving for the gift of trust and confidence that "health" and "wholeness" are not only God's will but what we are willing to receive and share with each other.*

And the next step we need to take to move along on our pastoral care course is for each of us to help break down the fear and secrecy that surrounds us, when we are in need. I am asking you to remind those who are hurting not to run away but to allow our community to care for their wounds and strengthen them with healing and presence.

Our fifth priority concerns **OUTREACH**: that St. Martin's be a church that "engages its membership with the needs of the world as a Christian community."

It seems to me that Christian people can suffer the most disappointment in this arena. I say this because the needs of the world are so very apparent that they easily overwhelm our ability to respond. The result is the very real

temptation to recoil from the crushing amount of pain in the world and to distance ourselves from its reality. The resulting consequence is either we feel guilty over not doing something; or we develop a numbness that feels no one's pain at all.

Outreach at St. Martin's recognizes this temptation and has taken concrete steps to prevent either guilt or numbness. This is to say that outreach at St. Martin's is discerned by employing three criteria. The first is: Is there a legitimate need? The second is: Can we offer something meaningful to that need? The third is: Will this effort result in the transformation of those in need and those offering the help?

By using these criteria – once again, criteria formed in the strategic planning process of 2004 – by using these criteria, St. Martin's is making a difference – to those in need and to those of us responding to the need. *Therefore, I call St. Martin's to celebration and thanksgiving over the fact that as we have had the courage to define more and more precisely our outreach focus, more lives have been touched in meaningful ways, and this place is seen increasingly as a reliable, compassionate beacon of hope.*

Let me give you two quick references among a handful of outreach momentum.

From the time I read the Rector's Search Profile for St. Martin's in 1998, the across-the-street proximity of Crayton Middle School hit me as an outreach "ground zero." Everything that this parish said mattered in terms of outreach was literally right across the street. The challenge was how to forge strategic, structural, institutional bonds of partnership, by which generations of St. Martin's and Crayton people could meet and work for the common good.

Thirteen months ago, we had a break through in this regard, and now I am so proud and grateful to say that St. Martin's is blazing a hot trail of ministry and presence to our school neighbors. And no one has kept the trail more toasty than Allison Askins, who when I asked her to help me inaugurate this idea leaped at the chance. God bless her.

And now, we have committed to honor the faculty of Crayton with a sit-down lunch here in our parish hall on all the in-service faculty days for this school year. This is to say that when the teachers have training days or days when they meet with parents, we are here to call them away for an hour, to be waited on, feted, and appreciated for the precious resources they are. It is a whole lot better than bringing them each an apple for their desk, although we do give them flowers to take back with them for their desks.

Moreover, the Crayton Middle School Project – that outreach we have yearned to execute with the kids – is being birthed as we speak. Our focus is on those students who have no supervision after school, largely because parents

work. The School Board has no money to provide enrichment programs and after-school care. The result is an accident waiting to happen, accidents our county sheriff has been calling to our attention over recent years, as gang activity increases and kids get in trouble.

Our goal is to be the setting for such an after-school, enrichment program; and we are starting small now to make sure we get this right. For to fail is unthinkable. We cannot abandon these kids.

So, we have formed a partnership with the YWCA, which is very eager to help run a program at a church with this kind of trajectory. Our initial foray will be focused on 15 -7<sup>th</sup> grade girls, who will be screened and invited by the school and the Y to participate in a special program that calls girls to confidence, independence, and healthy behaviors. The program costs \$40 per week per student, and it will meet in the Youth House. We expect that half of the girls who participate will not be able to afford the cost, even though it is very low, especially for such a rich program.

At the October Vestry meeting, your Vestry committed itself to providing \$12,000 to fund scholarships for this first class of girls. They did so with unhesitating passion. It was one of the high-water marks of my association with any Vestry over the last 30 years. We are going to do this, and we are going to succeed. It is God's will and our call.

Another aspect of a maturing sense of outreach from this parish comes from the Metro Haiti Project. Last year, in response to decreased Diocesan funding, the 27-year-old mission to Haiti was in danger of being seriously reduced. The story of what our Diocese has done in nearly three-decades with our Haitian, Anglican partners is stunning and deserves to be told from the highest peaks. And I will be glad to do my part at the business meeting, if you would like to hear the story. Nonetheless, last year it seemed to me that such an important mission not only deserved support, but as an officer of the Diocesan Council (the Diocesan Vestry), I felt that such work should not be foisted onto the Diocese but rather franchised at the parish level. I also thought that we could accomplish a great deal by establishing partnerships with neighboring Episcopal parishes to do this work together. And that is what we did. Last year, with St. Martin's driving the bus, we formed the "Metro Haiti Group," consisting of St. John's, Shandon, St. Michael's, St. Francis, Chapin, and ourselves.

The need was to provide continuity with our Haitian partners, who needed to build additional schools for their children. We needed to raise \$60,000 to build a school and furnish \$5,000 per parish per year for five years to sustain the school. Where were we to get that kind of money? How could we possibly raise it?

Don't ask those sorts of questions when I am talking to English Morris! I had been bugging him to help me establish this church as a liturgical arts center,

where the artistic community could re-connect with its ancient partner, the church, and produce beauty through the arts as a way of knowing and celebrating God. Truth to tell, I didn't need to bug English for too long on this idea. Many of you remember the free offering to the community of "Amahl and the Night Visitors" in 2002 and 2003. We packed this place, and we gave light and life as a witness to an artistic culture that was gently, supplely, beautifully gospel-centered.

So, once I generously allowed English to catch his impresario breath, two summers ago we scheduled another production for our emerging liturgical arts, outreach ministry. Yet, it was just then that the need to fund the Haiti Project emerged. St. Martin's no-trumped the fund-raising bidding by suggesting that we would donate our production of "The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi" to the cause.

The other partners were grateful but very skeptical. After all, the idea sounded...well, really big. And it was; and it was a roaring success, as I trust each of you saw for yourselves. The net result was that we raised \$27,000 dollars directly from the play and another \$33,000 in residual offerings over the spring, summer, and fall. The point is that the \$60,000 has been sent to Father Lafontant, and the construction is set to begin. Who'd'a thunk it?

And this year, during the third week in Lent, on March 22, 23, and 24, "St. Martin's Liturgical Arts Ministry" will produce and offer several of the medieval Mystery Plays from Chester Cathedral. English, again, has taken this to heart and run the race without stumbling. He has made friends with a professor at Leeds University in England, who is a world-authority on the Mystery Plays, and he is ready for round two. I suspect with our track record from last year that this year's production will surpass what we did last year, the result of which will be outreach action in Haiti and new life here on Clemson Avenue.

*So, I call St. Martin's to celebration and thanksgiving for the gift of sharing new life in the face of fear and death through our outreach ministries.*

What is next is this. We will need helping hands and voices to pull all this off. Talk to Allison Askins about the Crayton Project. Or have your agent call English Morris's agent and do lunch to find out what it will take to make this liturgical arts presentation a great success. In this, too, we must not; we cannot fail. Lives depend upon it.

So, that is my report to you. Our course is set, and it follows the chart that is our baptismal vow: We follow Christ in order to become like Christ. As you can see, we are making headway, even though there are times when the daunting and always-present question of "what difference does it make?" threatens to cause us to lose heart. For there is so much for us to do; and we must keep our heading. We cannot lose heart. We cannot, we must not fail. For we are bearers of new life, Christ's life in a world desperate for what St. Martin's has been given. Plus

the wake that our ship is creating, what we don't see, what we can't see, pleases God.

I will end as I began: with a personal note and one last request.

I have been with you as your Rector for 7 ½ years, four of them alone in this ministry. I am tired, and sleep is not the answer. It is time for me to have a sabbatical, and I am asking you for your support in making this happen this year.

It has been over 12 years since my only other sabbatical. Even at that distance, I am continually fed by the experience, and it continues to change my life. I look forward to crafting – with your help – a similar experience.

I am 56 years old; I have been involved in this ministry for thirty years. I expect that I have another 20 or thirty years of ministry and leadership left in me before I hang up my uniform – or it is taken from me; but I need the opportunity now to step back from the intensity of parish ministry, especially in these demanding and contentious times. I need the opportunity to do some much needed healing of myself. I need to retune my soul's ear to listen in new ways to God's call to me. I also need to remember and re-treasure in my own heart that God loves me still.

A sabbatical would help me, and I believe it would also help St. Martin's. Amen.